



## **Introduction**

**By Jane Jelinski**

**I**nteroperability is defined as “the ability to share information via voice and data signals on demand, in real time, when needed and as authorized.” [1] The concept has been discussed since 1935, but little progress has been made until recently. “Some regions and metropolitan areas have moved ahead, but in general, we are still in the stone age of interoperability. If a 9/11—like disaster would happen today, in most jurisdictions we would still have to use runners to communicate among first responders.” [2]

Numerous challenges exist—the usual geographic and financial constraints and the more complicated political jurisdictional issues. Local law enforcement agencies understandably want to maintain control over their communication systems to assure they are secure. In addition, first-responders utilize internal communications most often, and consequently invest their limited time and financial resources internally. Extra-jurisdictional communications have not been a priority. A series of catastrophes - 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Southeast Asian tsunami to name a few, have startled us into recognizing that the importance of an effective interoperable communication system cannot be overstated. The National Governor’s Association has named interoperability as its top priority and has provided some funding for planning. The Montana legislature and the federal government have also directed additional fiscal and personnel resources for this project.

While financial support and technological improvements are important, coordination, cooperation and standard operating procedures are the keys to success. Jim McKay, Associate Editor of Emergency Management writes, “Governance, not technology, is the key to interoperability.” [3]

Montana is fortunate to have countless public safety professionals who have been working assiduously for years to build an emergency communications system that meets the goals of interoperability. Unlike in most other states, Montana’s system is being developed from the bottom up rather than as a state imposed mandate.

This issue of Montana Policy Review is intended to inform all of the stakeholders of the progress of Montana’s interoperability development. Local government officials, tribal governments, legislators, state agencies and all first responders need to be informed and involved as Interoperability Montana progresses.

## **Endnotes**

1. [http://www.govtech.com/gt/articles/102350?id=102350&story\\_pg=1](http://www.govtech.com/gt/articles/102350?id=102350&story_pg=1)
2. Viktor Mayer-Schonberger, “The Technology Trap,” Government Technology.
3. Ibid